



Belong

UP, UP AND AWAY WITH JESUS

Jesus went up, up and away
into the heavens, but he
did not leave us.

THE ASCENSION
AND THE RETURN
OF CHRIST

THE
SELF-EFFACING
SPIRIT

TO TRAVEL
HOPEFULLY



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UP, UP AND AWAY WITH JESUS



BY JAMES HENDERSON
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Remember the song, “Up, Up and Away”? The lyrics said, “Would you like to ride in my beautiful balloon... For we can fly, we can fly.”

When the 5th Dimension released the song in 1967, it captured the dreams of many people. If only we could get away from it all; if only we could fly, we might float above life’s problems.

Let’s take off in our hot air balloon. Let’s sail above the clouds. The world would look less ugly from such heights. It would seem a nicer place compared to when viewed up close and personal. It sounds like a great escape.

Jesus’ ascent to heaven, however, was not an escape to the heavens. It was not an attempt to get away from all his troubles; it was to bring us closer to God by sending the Holy Spirit. His plan is to be with us “always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

During the week before his crucifixion, we were constantly on Christ’s

**“WITH JESUS WE
CAN SOAR ABOVE
OUR EARTHLY
PROBLEMS. ”**

mind. He knew he would be killed, and he trusted that the Father would raise his body from the grave. He was less concerned about himself than he was about the disciples who would be left behind. And his thoughts were not just for the disciples alone: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message” (John 17:20). This is referring to us, we who would accept his grace in times to come.

“I will ask the Father,” Jesus explained, “and he will give you another Advocate to help you and be with you for ever... I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16, 18). Even though this was a time of anguish for him, his desire was to comfort his followers.

“Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you,” Jesus continued, “but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). After the resurrection, the disciples thought he would stay on earth “to restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). They still had not understood what Jesus had said to them, that he would send “another” Advocate—or Counselor, as we read in some translations.

Then the day came when “he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (Acts 1:9). Luke notes that Jesus was speaking words of comfort as he rose into the skies, “While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken into heaven” (Luke 24:51).

What was happening? And what relevance does the Ascension have for us?

The answers are found in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. The Father “raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 1:20). Paul’s emphasis is that we participate in his resurrection and ascension: “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). With Jesus we can soar above our earthly problems. There is “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you” and me (1 Peter 1:4).

Jesus had voiced his thoughts to the Father for our sake. He did not need to speak aloud because he and the Father are one, but he wanted us to know his prayer: “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to

you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). We are “shielded by God’s power” through faith until the Second Coming (1 Peter 1:5).

This power was invested in the promise of the Holy Spirit. After his resurrection, Jesus told his followers, “I am going to send you what my Father has promised,” that they would be “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

This same Spirit has been given to you and to me. The Spirit of Jesus dwells in us. Jesus has not left us. He has not abandoned us. Through the Spirit Jesus is here now, and we are with him eternally. That’s what the Ascension and Pentecost tell us.

Jesus went up, up and away into the heavens, but he did not leave us.

The ascension reminds us that Christianity is not only an historical faith, but a faith of the present and future. Jesus is, right now, in glorified humanity on the throne of the universe... He is not just our suffering servant who came and died and rose triumphant, but our actively ruling, actively conquering king.

– David Mathis



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THE ASCENSION AND THE RETURN OF CHRIST



BY MIKE MORRISON
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In Acts 1:9, we are told: “After Jesus said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” I would like to address a simple question: why? Why was Jesus taken up in this way? But before we get to that, let’s read the next three verses:

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. (vs. 10-12)

This passage makes two basic points— that Jesus ascended into heaven, and that he will return. Both of those items are important in the Christian faith, and both are included in the Apostles’ Creed, for example. First, Jesus ascended into heaven. This is commonly known as the Ascension, which is celebrated each year 40 days after Easter, always on a Thursday.

The second point this passage makes is that Jesus will return— he will return in the same way that he ascended. I believe that this latter point is the reason that Jesus ascended in a visible way— to emphasize that he will return in a visible way.

It would have been easy for Jesus to simply tell his disciples that he was going to his Father, and that that he would come back — and then he would simply disappear, as he did on other occasions, just this time never to be see again. I don’t know of any theological reason why Jesus would have to ascend in a visible way. He did this to make a point, to teach a particular lesson, to the disciples — and through them, to us.

By visibly going up into the air, Jesus made it

clear that he wasn't just disappearing— he was going to heaven, and there, he would be at the Father's right hand to intercede for us as our eternal High Priest. As one writer put it, Jesus is "our Man in heaven." We have somebody in heaven who understands who we are, understands our weaknesses, understands our needs, because he is a human. Even in heaven, he is still a human as well as being God.

Even after the Ascension, Scripture calls him a man. When Paul was preaching to the Athenians at the Areopagus, he said that God would judge the world by a man he has appointed, and that man is Jesus Christ. And when he wrote to Timothy, he called him the man Christ Jesus. He is still a human, and he still has a body. His body rose from the dead, and his body ascended into heaven.

“SO THE VISIBLE RISING INTO HEAVEN MAKES THIS POINT: THAT JESUS DIDN'T JUST GO AWAY — HE CONTINUES HIS MINISTRY IN A DIFFERENT WAY, AS OUR HIGH PRIEST, OUR INTERCESSOR, OUR MEDIATOR.”

Which leads to the question of just where is that body right now? How can a God who is omnipresent, not limited to space and matter, also have a body that is localized in a particular place? Is the body of Jesus floating somewhere in outer space? I don't know. I don't know how Jesus appeared behind locked doors, either, and I don't know how he could ascend into the air, contrary to the law of gravity. Apparently the laws of physics don't apply to the body of Jesus Christ. It's still a body, but it doesn't have limitations that we think are part of having a body.

That still doesn't answer the question of where the body is right now, but that's really not the most important thing we need to worry about, is it? We need to know that Jesus is in heaven, but we do not need to know just where that is. It is more important for us to know about the spiritual body, the way in which Jesus is living on earth right now

in the church. And he is doing that by means of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus ascended bodily into heaven, he was giving a visible sign that he continues to be human as well as divine. That gives us assurance that he is a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, as it says in Hebrews. So the visible rising into heaven makes this point: that Jesus didn't just go away — he continues his ministry in a different way, as our high priest, our intercessor, our mediator.

Another reason

I see a second reason, too, for why Jesus went up in a visible and physical way. Jesus had told his disciples in John 16 that "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." I am not sure why, but apparently Jesus had to go into heaven before the Day of Pentecost could happen. And when the disciples saw Jesus rise, they were also left with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

So there was no sadness involved, at least the way that Acts tells the story. There was no sorrow that the good ole days with Jesus in the flesh are a thing of the past. There was no idealizing of the past. Rather, there was an anticipation of the future, a looking forward to even greater things, as Jesus had promised.

As we read forward in the book of Acts, we see an excited buzz of activity among the 120 disciples. They were meeting together and praying and planning for work to do. They knew they had a job, and that is why they selected another apostle to replace Judas. They knew they had to be 12 people, representative of the new Israel that God was forming. They had a business meeting because they had business to do. Jesus had already given them the plan, to go into all the world as his witnesses. They just needed to wait in Jerusalem, as he had told them, until they were filled with power from on high, until they had received the promised Comforter.

So Jesus' ascension into heaven was a dramatic drum roll, a moment of suspense, as the disciples waited for the next stage of the rocket to ignite and blast them into greater and greater service. As Jesus had

promised them, with the Holy Spirit they would do even greater things than Jesus had done. And the visible ascension of Jesus into heaven was a promise of greater things to come.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit “another Comforter,” and it so happens that Greek has two different words for “another.” One means something similar, and the other means something different, and Jesus used the word for something similar. The Holy Spirit is similar to Jesus. The Spirit is a personal presence of God, not just a supernatural power. The Holy Spirit lives, and teaches, and speaks, and makes decisions. The Holy Spirit is a Person, a divine Person, part of the one God.

The Holy Spirit is so similar to Jesus that we can also say that Jesus lives within us, within the church. Jesus said, I will come and abide with the person who believes. I will live in them— and he does that in the Person of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus went away, but he did not leave us as orphans, on our own. He returns to us through the Holy Spirit living in us.

“AND SO WE WILL PARTICIPATE WITH JESUS IN HIS ASCENSION, JUST AS WE JOIN HIM IN HIS CRUCIFIXION AND IN HIS BURIAL AND IN HIS RESURRECTION.”

But he will also return in a physical and visible way, and I think this is the main reason he took the trouble to ascend in a physical and visible way. We are not to get the idea that, “Jesus is already here in the form of the Holy Spirit, so he has already returned and we shouldn’t expect anything more than what we already have.”

No, Jesus makes it clear here that his return is not a secret, invisible thing. It will be as clear as daylight, as clear as the rising of the sun. It will be visible to everyone, just as the ascension was visible to everyone at the Mount of Olives nearly 2000 years ago.

That gives us hope, that we can expect more than we have right now. Right now, we see a lot of weakness. We see weaknesses in ourselves, and weaknesses



Painting: John Singleton Copley

in our church, and weaknesses in Christianity as a whole. We certainly hope that things get better than this, and we have assurance from Christ that he will indeed intervene in a dramatic way, to give a quantum leap to the kingdom of God. He is not going to leave things the way they are.

He will come back in the same way that the disciples saw him go into heaven. That means visibly, physically. It even means a detail that I wouldn’t think all that important: the clouds. Just as he ascended into the clouds, the Bible says he will return with clouds. I don’t know the purpose of the clouds — they seem to symbolize the angels that come with Christ, but it seems that there will be physical clouds, too.

But that is a minor point. The main point is that Christ will return in a dramatic way. There will be flashes of light, loud noises, phenomenal signs in the sun and moon, and everyone will see it. There will be no mistake about it. No one will say, It happened over there. When it happens, it will happen everywhere, and there won’t be any questions about it.

And when it happens, Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians, we will rise to meet Christ in the air. This is what is known as the rapture, and this won’t be a secret rapture. It will be a very public rapture, as everyone will see Christ returning to earth. And

so we will participate with Jesus in his ascension, just as we join him in his crucifixion and in his burial and in his resurrection. We will also ascend into heaven, to meet the Lord as he returns, and then we shall also return to earth.

Does it make any difference?

But we don't know when this will be, so does it make any difference in our lives? It should. We find practical conclusions from this in 1 Corinthians and in 1 John. Let's look at 1 John 3: 2-3: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

And then John goes into a section that argues that believers obey God; we do not want a sinful life. There is a practical implication for our conviction that Jesus will return and we will be made like him. The result is that we try to get rid of sins. That doesn't mean that our efforts are going to save us, or that our failures are going to sink us, but it does mean that we try not to sin.

The second biblical conclusion to this is in 1 Corinthians 15, at the end of the resurrection chapter. After explaining about the return of Christ and our resurrection into immortality, Paul writes this in verse 58: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

So there is work for us to do, just as there was work for the first disciples. The commission that Jesus gave them is also given to us. We have a gospel to preach, a message to proclaim, and we have been given the Holy Spirit in power to be able to do it. So there's work to do.

We do not need to stand around gazing at the sky, waiting for Christ to return. For that matter, neither do we need to be gazing at the Scriptures for clues as to exactly when this might be, when Scripture tells us quite plainly that it isn't for us to know. Instead, we have the promise that he will return, and that should be enough for us. There is work to do, and we need to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Yet, because Christ remains one person, as on earth so also in heaven at the right hand of the Father, what he did on earth he continues to do in heaven, offering himself to the Father in love and obedience, although not now under the human regime unto death

– Andrew Purves



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THE SELF-EFFACING SPIRIT



BY BARRY ROBINSON
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Charles Dickens penned the following words for one of his most memorable characters, Uriah Heep:

*I am well aware that I am the umblest person going...My mother is likewise a very umble person. We live in a umble abode...My father's former calling was umble.*¹

Uriah Heep is famous for bringing the virtue of humility into disrepute as he makes it a source of pride and boasting. He talks about being ever so 'umble' in such a way that demonstrates the opposite. To be truly humble is to be self-effacing, not claiming attention for oneself, and that brings us, believe it or not, to the Holy Spirit.

Looking ahead to the day of Pentecost, which we will soon be celebrating, I took a look at Peter's sermon given on that eventful day more than 2,000 years ago. It struck me that his message wasn't on the Holy Spirit, which had appeared so dramatically. The appearance was accompanied by the sound of a violent wind, what seemed like tongues of fire and the speaking of different languages. But rather Peter spoke about Jesus.

**“HE WILL TAKE
WHAT IS MINE
AND DECLARE IT
TO YOU”**

The Holy Spirit is self-effacing in that it is in his nature to focus the spotlight on someone else. The whole point of a spotlight is to light something up. You don't look at the spotlight when it's on, rather you look at what it lights up, whether it be a stage, a path, a building or a person. The Holy Spirit is a spotlight on Jesus. The Spirit's work is to illuminate Jesus, testifying about him and his work.

In the final words Jesus spoke to the disciples before his death and return to his Father, he teaches us about the Spirit. He tells us that *'He [the Spirit] will not speak on his own'* (John 16:13 NRSV throughout). In this passage in John, the Holy Spirit is understood as a teacher – the one who will teach the people of God when Jesus is no longer there in the flesh to do so. The Spirit is self-effacing in the sense that he does not teach about himself, nor on his own authority. Some of the best teachers I have ever had are those who have been so involved in and enthused by their subject, that they don't put across themselves rather they want their students to be enthralled and captivated by the topic they are teaching.

What is it that the Holy Spirit teaches? Jesus says, *'he will take what is mine and declare it to you'* (v.14). Although Jesus is not going to be with us in the way he was, he is still the focus of our life and activity. The Gospel is all about Jesus. He is the one who came, loved, died, and rose for us, and is now present with the Father as our eternal mediator and priest. The Spirit is self-effacing in pointing us to our Lord. His sole concern is to open to us the truth about Jesus. As Eugene Peterson writes in his Message paraphrase, *'the Spirit of the Truth... won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I [Jesus] have done and said. He [the Spirit] will honor me [Jesus]'*. (John 16:12-15).

In Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, the focus of his message was *'...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'* (Acts 2:21). The self-effacing Holy Spirit goes on to inspire Peter to speak about Jesus:

1. His life – he was *'a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs'* (v.22).
2. His death – *'this man...you crucified and killed'* (v.23).

3. His resurrection – *'But God raised him up, having freed him from death'* (v.24)
4. His ascension – *'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God'* (v.33).

Peter's purpose was to demonstrate the certainty that Jesus is indeed *'both Lord and Messiah'* (v.36).

The spotlight was on Jesus – the Holy Spirit had placed Jesus in the limelight. As a result, the people were *'cut to the heart'* asking what they should do (v.37). The way the Holy Spirit penetrates people's hearts is by shining a light on Jesus and convicting them of their unbelief in him (John 16:9).

What should we make of all this? Perhaps the bottom line is, as we live a Spirit-filled life, our words and actions should point to and illuminate Jesus, and, as on the Day of Pentecost, it will have an impact on people. It befits us then to be self-effacing; humble enough to realise that any fruit borne is not because of our efforts but is due to our participation in the work of the Holy Spirit. Because the same Spirit that was in Peter on the day of Pentecost is now in us, witnessing and testifying to the risen Lord Jesus in whom our salvation is secure.

Reference:

¹ David Copperfield, chapter 16.

TO TRAVEL HOPEFULLY

We are not alone in our travels, Jesus is with us through the Holy Spirit and in his resurrection and ascension we can see our destination



BY MAGGIE MITCHELL
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N T Wright in his book, 'Surprised by Hope', asks the question, "What is the ultimate Christian hope?" He ties this to another question: "What hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, new possibilities within the world at present?" He argues that our ultimate hope does not lie in going away from this world. Hope in the resurrection is tied to hope in our everyday life – we are not mortgaging everything for the future. In fact it gives more value to our present world. He validates this present life as more than just an inferior process which must precede the life to come. We are encouraged to "live as resurrection people".

What do you have hope in? What do I have hope in? At this time there are many things we hope for. In a troubled world that is searching for answers we hope that there will be opportunities for the gospel to be preached, acknowledging that we have some part in that. We hope that we – and those we love – remain free from Covid-19. We hope the disease will perhaps just go away. We hope the world will return to normal – whatever normal is. If we, or the ones we love, have already been infected, we hope that we, and they, will get better. Those of us who have been close to someone who has suffered and died – from any illness or accident – will know that hope, and the prayer that accompanies it, does not always result in the response we want. If we are to have hope, it needs to be in something that can be realised.

A lot has been talked about hope recently. That's not surprising because we have recently travelled through the time of year where we remember, particularly, the events more than two thousand



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years ago that led to the crucifixion of Jesus and his subsequent, prophesied resurrection. We have vicariously walked that journey with him and his disciples. And we have real hope because of that resurrection. We have hope because it includes a promise of a resurrection we will be part of – that we are already part of. Paul made the comment that, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19). He was referring to the promised resurrection that we look forward to.

This underlines the need that hope is to be founded on something with real substance. Paul doesn't say that there's no hope in relation to this current life. He just points out that it has to go beyond the day-to-day concerns of being human to provide any real meaning. I learnt in the two years my husband suffered paralysis and repeated bouts of pneumonia, that hope cannot be rooted in the expectation of physical healing. If that is the case, we know from experience that we are sometimes bound to be disappointed. What we have hope in is as important as knowing what hope is.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, mentions hope

again when he lists three abiding qualities – “faith, hope and love” (1 Cor 13:13). Love is singled out as being the greatest of the three, but that doesn’t mean the other two should be passed over. Love might be the one that gives perfect meaning to the other two but faith and hope are still qualities to seek and desire and pray for. Faith is the abiding knowledge that Christ is who he says he is – the Messiah. The hope we have is in the resurrection, which prompts us to take a part in the work he is doing – the sharing of his message, which is the gospel. Love fuels us on the journey – on the travelling – of realising the hope that is laid before us.

Robert Louis Stephenson, who wrote more than *Treasure Island* or *Kidnapped*, is quoted as saying, “To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive”. The essence of this is that the journey is more important than the destination. Stephen Fry resonated with this when he less famously, and more frivolously, said, “Christmas, to a child, is the first terrible proof that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive”.

If we live by this maxim it means we are always travelling, always itinerant, never finding home. So is that better? Try telling that to a traveller on Southern Trains. And try telling that to the Israelites who endured forty years of travelling; wandering in the wilderness – looking for their home; waiting to arrive.

Hope became a subject for psychology investigation in the 1990s when Snyder published his intriguingly entitled book, *The Psychology of Hope – You Can Get There From Here*. Even the title suggests a journey – travelling. Hope is part of the area known as Positive Psychology - an area of psychology that looks at the things that are functional in human behaviour, and asks ‘Why?’ This is opposed to the traditional approach of looking at the behaviours that are dysfunctional and asking that same question, ‘Why?’

Snyder developed his ‘Hope Theory’ and created a tool to measure ‘hope’ in individuals. He suggested that people could be encouraged to become what he described as ‘high-hoppers’. These were people who would have a more positive outlook on life, showing three core characteristics:

1. Having focused thoughts
2. Having developed strategies to achieve goals

3. Being motivated to make the effort to realise the goals

He described hope as being, “a positive emotional state” and this was based on the energy someone has to pursue goals, their ability to plan ‘pathways’ to achieve those goals and the ability to navigate barriers that might get in the way of those goals. Paul’s passion for the gospel, encompassing as it did the promise of a resurrection, is perfectly described here. Paul would have been one of Snyder’s ‘high-hoppers’.

And this outline does encompass the idea of finding a home, reaching a conclusion and it also defines the journey along which we travel. In Snyder’s language, we have focused thoughts – the preaching of the gospel; we have developed strategies to achieve this goal; we are able to overcome the barriers that get in the way and we are motivated to make the effort to realise this goal. This process is echoed by Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians when he writes concerning: “your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:3).

Hope can be a hard thing to sustain when the journey is long and the goal seems remote. So Christ encourages us through a message he gave to his disciples: “but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:13). This is in the context of preaching the gospel – that is something that we can have hope in. and our hope in this is, ultimately, hope that we place in the person of Jesus Christ, expressed by Paul in Colossians: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

Yes, we are travelling. And we are travelling in hope - a hope that the resurrection provides; the ultimate hope that the gospel points to. We are not travelling alone. We have Jesus walking alongside – as he walked alongside the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, explaining the things they were struggling with and the things they were blind to. We have a guide in the Holy Spirit. And the end of our journey is detailed in Revelation - and it is worth the journey. No more pain. No more tears. For the former things – all that has happened, and will happen on the journey, including this present frightening ‘national emergency’ – are passed away (Rev 21:4).

BREAK MY HEART FOR WHAT BREAKS YOURS...

*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.
(Psalm 51:7)*



BY CARRIE OSBORNE
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Sometimes it can seem overwhelming to live with the brokenness we have experienced, or even caused, in our everyday worlds, which often leaves us feeling separate or far from our Father. Thankfully, God knew we would need to be reminded of his presence with us in all things – sharing Jesus and the Holy Spirit with us as well as providing faithful reminders through Scripture.

David shared this psalm after Nathan came to him about his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. Talk about brokenness caused and experienced in life! Yet even David is able to remember and share God's presence with him! David's psalm shows us God is ready, willing and able to bring goodness from our mess. God reaches out to us to participate with him, in the midst of our brokenness, to shine his light, goodness, and love into the world.

How does God do that? I think it is the same way an artist creates stained glass windows. He takes the broken pieces of our lives and puts them together to create something beautiful that becomes magnificent when his light shines through it for all to see. This year, may you find new meaning in your brokenness and experience God's life-giving presence even in the most overwhelming of circumstances.

Prayer: Lord, may my brokenness no longer hinder me from joining you in your mission of love. Help me see the beauty in my brokenness that I might shine your light for all those around me to see and share. Amen!

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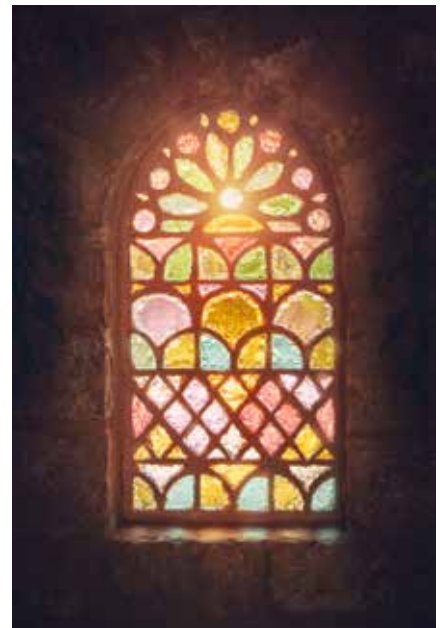


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